

# Jim and Jan Witt

## 2001 Outstanding Conservation Farmers

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By embracing and carrying the great responsibility of good natural resource stewardship, Jim and Jan Witt of St. Clair County have proven their commitment to their land and to the values of Alabama's Treasure Forest program. This commitment is what led the Witt's to become St. Clair County's 2001 Outstanding Conservation Farmer.

The Witt's 720-acre farm is located in the scenic Beaver Valley of St. Clair County. The farm has been in Jan's family since the 1840's where it has been handed down from generation to generation. Jan Witt and her children inherited a portion of the land from their father and grandfather, Dr. Willard T. Farmer. Jim and Jan began managing the property around seven years ago when the majority of the original farm was purchased from the other heirs.

Because the property had formerly been used as grazing land for cattle, the edges had been taken over by mixed hardwood and pine stands as well as being high-graded. This left behind poor quality form and species. To help in the management of the land the Witt's contacted a registered consulting forester and the Alabama Forestry Commission to assist them in developing a long-term management objective for the farm. The couple decided to concentrate their efforts on timber and wildlife management.

A plan was developed and goals set in order to realize the management objectives for the family. Many tracts were recognized as needing immediate attention and the remaining property was placed into a long-term forest management plan. Around 100 acres of poorly

managed forested land had to be clearcut and replanted. Several beetle spots were salvaged, wildlife food plots established, roads and stream crossings improved or established, fire lanes built, and property



*Jan and Jim Witt (center and right) are shown receiving their TREASURE Forest certificate and sign from Alabama Forestry Commission St. Clair County Forester Derrick Heckman.*

lines marked. Of the remaining 500 acres a viable stand of quality hardwood and mixed pine existed.

Although burning had been excluded for a number of years the existence of natural longleaf pine was evident in some of the remaining over story. The decision was made by the Witt family to restore the once dominant longleaf pine.

Prescribed burning plays a very important role in both timber and wildlife management on the Witt farm. After four years of burning a patchwork of timber stands, the final burn was completed this past spring. In the future, the 600 acres of forested land will be on a three-year rotation of burning.

The many miles of roads and fire lanes on the property have allowed for the success of the prescribed burning program. All fire lanes have been maintained to prevent erosion and to provide forage for wildlife.

Some wildlife forage planted included rye grass, clover and wheat.

Aside from the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Witt's also consulted several additional agricultural agencies including Natural Resources Conservation Service, St. Clair County Soil and Water Conservation District, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and Farm Services. Much of the work was done with cost share and Soil and Water Conservation district monies.

The property supports an abundance of wildlife including deer, turkey, squirrel, rabbit, beaver, coyote, bobcat, fox, opossum, raccoon, wood ducks and many species of songbirds. This abundance of species is due to the diversity of the farm.

One of the many income sources of the farm is the 120-acre pasture contract that provides high quality coastal and fescue hay for a local cattle farmer. The pasture also provides openings where fertilized pasture grasses add high quality forage for many species of wildlife.

In addition to hay contracts, the family leases hunting rights to a small party of bow hunters. It is very important for the Witt's to be able to interact with the wildlife that exists on their farm. This is one reason why only bow hunting is allowed.

The four ponds on the property provide recreational opportunities for the family, including fishing, picnicking, and


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sional with your best interest in mind. By having a written contract, closely monitoring the actual thinning operation, and reviewing the process upon completion, you will implement the same downsizing techniques that made many large corporations what they are today.

## Plan Your Strategy

As you plan your downsizing efforts, consider the following trade secrets:

- 1 Select a customized thinning method. For most first time thins, consider a combination 5th row thin and crown thin with a residual basal area of 70 ft/acre. The thin-from-below method should be utilized the 2nd or 3rd time a stand is thinned. The method and intensity of the thinning on your property should be customized to meet your objectives and existing stand conditions.
- 2 Select a reputable, experienced timber purchaser. Remember, the primary purpose of a thin is to set up your pine plantation for future growth in value. Therefore, immediate revenue is secondary to long-term productivity. The selection of a reputable timber purchaser is one of the most important steps in the entire thinning process.
- 3 Consider a "pay-as-cut" contract. Pay-as-cut contracts often yield higher revenues for landowners than those sold lump sum. Under this method of payment, the timber purchaser assumes less risk. However, most of the risk of losing money is shifted from the timber purchaser to you! Therefore, consult with your industry expert before selling timber using this method of payment.
- 4 Don't limit your contact to paper industries. Some of the highest prices and best jobs of thinning may come from wood dealers and manufacturers of oriented strand board (OSB). Be sure to shop around.
- 5 Collect a performance bond. You or your industry expert should hold a performance bond until the timber purchaser completes the contract to ensure compliance. The amount of the bond is determined primarily by the size of the area to be thinned, ranging in size from 5-10% of the total anticipated value of the timber to be removed.
- 6 Don't be fooled by high chip-n-saw prices. Chip-n-saw prices are typically 2-3 times greater than those for pulpwood. However, if there are no trees of this size class to be removed or if the purchaser does not separate the products, the price difference is irrelevant.
- 7 Consider rate of return. Remember, the primary purpose of a thin is to increase future value by stimulating the growth of better trees. Unless there is a significant increase in price anticipated within the next year, go ahead and thin. The loss in rate of return due to the slowed growth of crop trees is probably the most underrated thief of productivity.
- 8 Inspect thinning operation. It's a good idea to inspect the thinning operation on a regular basis to ensure that the proper trees are being removed and the crop trees are being protected. Take pictures of roads and stand density both before and after thinning. These will be beneficial in the case of a dispute and will also serve to document your progress!

By understanding these principles and by using industry professionals with your best interest in mind, you are much more likely to successfully downsize your pine plantation and greatly improve your bottom line. 


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boating. A three-acre crawfish pond also provides a water resource as well as crawfish for the family and friends. .

Because of the rich history of the area and the farm itself, several old buildings have been left on the property. An old home and several outbuildings and barns still stand and some are in use. The Witt's have taken great efforts to preserve the remnants of what was once an old stagecoach road.

The Witt's are committed to promoting natural resource education and for several years they have hosted the county forestry judging contest.

Because of their outstanding efforts, the Witt's have been awarded the distinction of TREASURE Forest. They are the 1,656th TREASURE Forest to be certified in the state. 

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